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Worlds Beyond the Political? Post-development approaches in practices of transnational solidarity activism

Kalpana Wilson

ABSTRACT: *This article considers some ways in which one strand of post-development thinking has influenced NGO-led activist discourses and practices of transnational solidarity. It argues that there has been a tendency for these discourses and practices to rearticulate racialised constructions of unspoiled and authentic 'natives' requiring protection which are historically embedded in colonial practices of governance. In turn, this has meant the failure to acknowledge indigenous histories of political organisation and resistance. Further, the characterization of development in binary terms as both homogenous and always undesirable has meant the delegitimisation of demands for equality as well as the neglect of the implications of the decisive shift from developmentalism to neoliberal globalization as the dominant paradigm. Drawing upon a discussion of aspects of the local, national and transnational campaign to prevent proposed bauxite mining in the Niyamgiri hills in Odisha (India), I argue that given that international NGOs are themselves embedded in the architecture of neoliberal development and aid, their campaigning activities can be understood as facilitating the displacement and marginalization of local activists and silencing their complex engagements with ideas of development. This potentially diffuses and depoliticises opposition to neoliberal forms of development, while transposing collective agency onto undifferentiated publics in the global North, processes which however continue to be actively resisted.*

Keywords: post-development, neoliberalism, Vedanta, NGOs, transnational solidarity

Introduction

Like other theoretical trends within international development, post-development has emerged from particular processes of struggle and contestation over development policies and practices. Unlike others however, its central project is the deconstruction of development itself, which is characterised as 'a pervasive cultural discourse with profound consequences for the production of social reality in the so-called Third World'¹. For post-development writers, this deconstruction leads to 'the possibility of imagining a post-development era, one in which the centrality of development as an organizing principle of social life would no longer hold'². Post-development has thus sought to transcend debates about the ways in which development could be best achieved and to question the very desirability of development as a goal, however it was conceived. Much post-development thinking drew inspiration from the 'new social movements' of the 1990s³, which while resisting the manifestations of neoliberal globalization such as displacement, dispossession and environmental destruction tended to invoke community rather than class identities, unlike other radical movements

with similar concerns which were led by left political parties (although in reality this distinction was not always clear cut) and to eschew prescriptions for social transformation. For Escobar, this was epitomized by the Zapatistas' slogan of "one no and many yeses", with the no being to neo-liberal globalisation and to the European modernity model underlying it, and the many yeses being region-specific, movement-specific'⁴. I argue that despite this affinity with one strand of radical social movements, in the intervening period, specific elements of post-development thinking have been selectively appropriated within the discourses and practices of international NGOs which are embedded in the architecture of mainstream development. This article explores the implications of this for the discursive and material practices of transnational solidarity in which these NGOs engage, and suggests that there are specific aspects within post-development thought, which have made it particularly amenable to this incorporation within contemporary dominant development discourses.

I focus here on three critiques of postdevelopment and examine their implications for transnational solidarity activism. These are firstly, the tendency in one strand of post-development to romanticize and essentialise the local and traditional in ways which reproduce and reinforce racialised colonial discourses⁵; secondly, post-development's failure to engage with demands for development, conceived in multiple ways, articulated by poor and marginalized groups⁶ and thirdly, the neglect within post-development scholarship of the transition from developmentalism to neoliberalism as the dominant development approach and its material and discursive implications⁷.

In his seminal post-development text 'Encountering Development'⁸, Escobar warns against the romanticisation of knowledges and practices constructed as 'local' and 'traditional' and the elision of the inequalities, histories and power relations which shape them, arguing that 'one must be careful not to naturalise "traditional" worlds, that is, valorize as innocent and "natural" an order produced by history.... These orders can also be interpreted in terms of specific effects of power and meaning. The 'local' moreover, is neither unconnected nor unconstructed, as is thought at times'⁹. However, arguably one strand within postdevelopment thinking continued to reproduce precisely these elisions and naturalizations. Ziai¹⁰ makes a distinction between 'sceptical' postdevelopment, which he suggests 'does not generally reject all elements of modernity but promotes cultural hybridization, is critical towards cultural traditions, abstains from articulating desirable models of society and employs a dynamic, constructivist conception of culture'¹¹ and a 'conservative', 'neo-populist' postdevelopment which 'promotes the return to (often idealized) subsistence communities, employing an essentialised conception of culture'¹². This latter approach is epitomised perhaps by Rahnema and Bawtree's frequently cited description of development which decries how 'under the banner of

development and progress...a merciless war was fought against the age-old traditions of communal solidarity. The virtues of simplicity and conviviality, of noble forms of poverty, of the wisdom of relying on each other, and of the arts of suffering were derided as signs of “underdevelopment”¹³.

This approach is evidently structured by many of the binary oppositions which characterize colonial discourses: tradition vs. modernity, simplicity vs. sophistication, communality vs. individuality, spirituality vs. rationality. As Maria Eriksson Baaz points out, ‘while post-development and the Eurocentric modernization approach are on one level based on opposing strategies, the two discourses share a central discursive strategy – representations of *difference*’¹⁴. On one level, then ‘conservative postdevelopment’ can be understood simply as reversing the hierarchy and revaluing the attributes which are ascribed to the ‘derided’ Other. But arguably, it can also be seen as rearticulating and updating elements which are in fact already pervasive within colonial discourse.

Racialised colonial representations of the ‘noble savage’ of the Americas tragically but inexorably doomed to extinction, of the ‘dignity’ of the ‘Pathan warrior’ or the ‘innocence and simplicity’ of the Indian ‘hill tribes’ are just some of many which produced subjects who were simultaneously romanticized and infantilised. Postcolonial theorists like Bhabha¹⁵ have highlighted this ambivalence which pervades colonial stereotypes, highlighting how the colonised ‘Other’ can also be the (forbidden) object of desire. Striking continuities between Western dissatisfaction with European modernity which produced the trope of the ‘noble savage’ and a comparable projection by post-development thinkers onto the ‘local’ and ‘traditional’ has been noted (see for example Eriksson Baaz¹⁶). As we will see, contemporary narratives about poor people in the global South emerging from a broadly post-development framework operate within racialised regimes of representation¹⁷ in which the desire for the racialised other¹⁸ can be understood as repressed, or in more Foucauldian terms, as *produced* by colonial discourse¹⁹. Yet while marked by ambivalence, such representations also directly and indirectly informed strategies of governmentality and facilitated the extraction of resources. The ‘savage’ characteristics of nobility, dignity and simplicity were continually contrasted not only with those of the European rational man with complex individual needs and desires, but also with those of other colonized subjects who were constructed as lacking these premodern virtues. For example many of the *adivasi*/indigenous peoples of India were designated by British colonial administrators as ‘primitive tribes’ at risk of exploitation by ‘cunning’ and ‘avaricious’ ‘Hindus’ from the plains and therefore requiring the protection of the colonial state. This obscured the role of colonialism in exploiting and dispossessing *adivasi* groups both directly, and indirectly through local usurers, traders and landlords. It denied the underlying reasons for the series of *adivasi* uprisings against forced dispossession of land, oppressive taxation, forced and indentured labour and

reservation of forests²⁰, while it also legitimised strategies of surveillance and control over *adivasi* populations through special regulations which ‘at best amounted to paternal despotism’²¹. It also constructed the colonial state as protecting *adivasi* communities from exposure to the materially and morally destructive effects of modernity and progress, effects which are constructed in a way which can be understood as prefiguring elements of the postdevelopment critique.

This discourse, however, co-existed and complemented the dominant strand within colonial discourse in which ‘primitive’, ‘backward’ groups were viewed as the objects of missions to civilize and develop, justifying brutal repression when they resisted. This is evident, for example in colonial ethnologist W.W. Hunter’s explanation of the uprising by the *adivasi* Santhal community in 1855: ‘The inoffensive but only half tamed highlander had tasted blood, and in a moment his savage nature returned’²². I argue that this co-existence also characterizes contemporary development interventions, and has partially enabled the incorporation of one strand of postdevelopment critiques within dominant discourses of development.

While Escobar explicitly critiques the coloniality of this discourse²³ and has come to be more closely associated with ideas of decoloniality which have developed in Latin America²⁴ through the work of Walter D. Mignolo, María Lugones and Anibal Quijano among others, I suggest that it is the strand of postdevelopment thinking which remains rooted in notions of timeless traditions and undifferentiated communities which has been most influential within NGO-led transnational solidarity activism.

This version of postdevelopment again raises the spectre of ‘authenticity’ and like its colonial predecessors, abrogates to itself the power to identify it. Postcolonial feminist writers have explored the ways in which the construction of the ‘authentic native’, ‘the unspoiled African, Asian or Native American who remains more preoccupied with his/her image of the real native – the truly different – than with the issues of hegemony, racism, feminism and social change’²⁵ sustains and reproduces contemporary racialised relations of power. This notion of ‘inauthenticity’ also becomes a weapon of dominant groups with an interest in maintaining the status quo. In the Indian context, conservative forces have long mobilized it in attempts to discredit transformative politics such as those of Marxism and feminism as ‘alien’²⁶; recently we have seen right-wing Hindu nationalist ideologues explicitly mobilizing the ideas of postdevelopment theorists like Ashis Nandy²⁷ in their promotion of an upper caste Hindu supremacist project which ironically, is not only colonial in origin, but today is inseparable from the corporate-driven predatory neoliberal version of ‘development’ pursued by the Narendra Modi government.

If the tendency to romanticize and essentialise the ‘local’ and ‘traditional’ in postdevelopment thinking is arguably more visible among the ‘conservative’ strand of its proponents, a more pervasive (though related) problem is postdevelopment’s understanding of critiques of poverty and global economic inequality as themselves an effect of development discourse. As Arturo Escobar had summarised the postdevelopment position: ‘Poverty on a global scale was a discovery of the post-World War II period... If within market societies the poor were defined as lacking what the rich had in terms of money and material possessions, poor countries came to be similarly defined in relation to the standards of wealth of the more economically advantaged nations’²⁸

This approach has been seen as leading to a failure to engage with the struggles of poor and marginalized communities which are actually articulated in terms of needs and desires for development²⁹, albeit quite differently conceived from the notion of ‘development’ being promoted by global capital. I argue in this article that this failure has particularly marked implications for practices of transnational solidarity activism. In particular, the incorporation of some elements of postdevelopment thinking within the discourses and practices of international NGOs has actually contributed to displacing and marginalizing local activists and diffusing the potential for a transnational politics of solidarity and resistance to neoliberal forms of development.

Further, in highlighting the continuities in the ‘meta-narratives’ of development and the continuing centrality of discourses of progress, improvement, and meeting goals, postdevelopment approaches obscure the very substantial changes in global patterns of capital accumulation, and relatedly in the dominant development approaches, which have marked the period since 1945. Postdevelopment as well as postcolonial critiques have highlighted the Eurocentrism of a monolithic developmentalism based on planning and characterized by ‘the construction of roads, hydroelectric projects, schools, hospitals and factories’³⁰. But this does not recognise the decisive shift since the 1980s from the ‘developmental state’ to neoliberal ‘accumulation by dispossession’³¹ which by contrast, has witnessed the destruction of such public services and infrastructure, and under which ‘development’ is more likely to entail unplanned and untrammelled incursions by footloose corporate capital seeking to extract and export resources.

This neglect of historical changes in development is particularly problematic because of the capacity of neoliberal discourses to flexibly incorporate critical ideas. Increasingly, the notions of ‘difference’ and multiple subjectivities which poststructuralists have used to counter hegemonic constructions of knowledge have, like the notion of agency, been appropriated, transformed and redeployed within

neoliberal discourses of development. They reappear in the context of an emphasis on ‘choice’, individual ‘empowerment’ through the market and users’ control over (for which read responsibility for) social provision, legitimising policies of liberalisation, privatisation and outright corporate plunder, and marginalising questions of inequality, oppression and exploitation³². More fundamentally, development is no longer primarily discursively constructed in the universalising terms of ‘catching up with the West’ which have been the main focus of critique by post-development theorists, but also offered possibilities for appropriation by progressive and left forces in the global South³³. As Duffield has noted, the rise of sustainable development as the dominant development paradigm marked a break with the ‘aspirational goal’ of modernization theory which claimed that living standards in the ‘underdeveloped’ world would eventually come to resemble those in the ‘developed’ countries³⁴. In the era of the Sustainable Development Goals, North/South inequality is instead assumed to be necessary to sustainability and the emphasis is now on ‘adaptation’ and ‘resilience’, in the interests of containment of the global South and maintaining the security of the global North³⁵. While capital has always functioned through differentiation as well as homogenization³⁶, ‘difference’, is now explicitly affirmed in dominant development discourses in the form of this permanent global inequality, which seen as a requirement for sustainability.

In what follows, I will explore the themes outlined above through a discussion of aspects of the local, national and transnational campaign to prevent proposed bauxite mining in the Niyamgiri hills in Odisha (India). I first examine discuss the way the sustained resistance of the Dongria Kond people in the region to the mining corporate Vedanta has been represented internationally, how this mobilizes tropes which are also present in some postdevelopment discourses, and the possible relationship between these representations and the structural position of international NGOs within the contemporary architecture of development. The article then goes on to explore these questions further through a reflection on some contesting practices of solidarity which emerged in the British based campaign against mining in Niyamgiri. Lastly, I consider an alternative set of representations of the movement against mining in Niyamgiri, discussing the analysis put forward by participants in the Niyamgiri movement in the independently produced film *Wira Pdika*, and, in particular, their complex engagements with questions of development.

Niyamgiri: solidarity or protection of the ‘authentic’?

Vedanta is a London FTSE 250 listed Mining Corporation. It is 67.99% owned by Anil Agarwal and his family (as of January 2014) through a series of tax havens and holding companies. The UK's Department for International Development and Department of Trade and Industry helped launch it on the London Stock Exchange in 2003. Vedanta has mines, refineries and factories in various states in India –as well as in Zambia, Liberia, South Africa, Namibia, Australia and Ireland. It has recently expanded its activities from aluminium to iron ore, copper, zinc and oil³⁷. Vedanta's aluminium refinery at Lanjigarh in Odisha has been held responsible for polluting fertile agricultural land over a vast area in a region which has seen starvation deaths every year since 2007; contaminating drinking water sources by dumping fly ash and toxic red mud into river streams; and displacing thousands of people from their homes. For more than a decade, people who live in this region mainly belonging to Dongria Kond *adivasi* communities have been waging a sustained struggle against the company's incursions in the region, resisting Vedanta's plans for a 73 million tonne bauxite mine in the Niyamgiri hills and a six-fold increase in the Lanjigarh refinery's capacity, with massive blockades and protests. The Dongria Konds depend on the hills and their complex ecology for their livelihoods, and consider the mountain targeted for mining as sacred. Their movement has won some important victories, most notably in 2013 when Vedanta was stopped from mining the Niyamgiri hills for bauxite, costing the company up to \$10 billion. But the struggle against the corporation, which is still pressing to be allowed to mine for bauxite and to expand its refinery, continues. Since then, the state has stepped up repression of the movement, and appears seeking to replicate strategies of militarization and police and army terror adopted to pave the way for corporate exploitation in other mineral rich Indian states by falsely labeling local activists as Maoists and Naxalites³⁸. Recent protests against this wave of arrests, torture and false cases in Niyamgiri have also been highly critical of the role of NGOs in the movement, with banners reading 'Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti demands that all foreign and local NGOs in the area duping us should Go Back!' and 'we rejected NGOs'³⁹

As this suggests, a range of transnational actors have engaged in campaigning and advocacy in opposition to Vedanta's activities in Odisha, including a number of international NGOs, as well as unfunded activist campaigns and organizations⁴⁰, and this has led to the production and circulation of a variety of representations of the movement against Vedanta⁴¹. Among these is an article published in June 2010 by the British Observer newspaper, written by the celebrity environmental campaigner Bianca Jagger and entitled 'The battle for Niyamgiri'. Jagger had visited the Indian state of Odisha on a trip organized by international NGO Action Aid, to meet local Dongria Kond *adivasi* people who are overwhelmingly opposed to the proposal by Vedanta to mine for bauxite in the Niyamgiri hills

The article provides an interesting example of the way racialised constructions of the ‘authentic other’ have been mobilized in the context of NGO-led solidarity initiatives. In the article, Jagger explains the situation with Vedanta, and the destructive impact of the aluminium refinery set up by Vedanta in neighbouring Lanjigarh, and then goes on to describe her ‘sudden’ meeting with ‘a large gathering of more than 100 members of the Dongria Kondh’:

‘A group of smiling women surround me and put their arms around my waist, leading me to my assigned seat. They give me a bouquet of scented flowers and welcome everyone by putting the traditional "tika" on our foreheads, made with the paste of turmeric and rice. The women and girls are wearing their traditional colourful clothes, beaded jewellery, hairpins, ear- and nose rings, and head necklaces. In contrast, the men wear plain dhotis. Many have long hair tied into a knot in the nape of their necks. Some are carrying axes on their shoulders and in their hands. One can already see the influence of "development" in some of the young men wearing shirts and T-shirts.’⁴²

Many of the binary oppositions discussed above are in play here – the undifferentiated ‘smiling women’, the repeated use of the word ‘traditional’ which recurs throughout the article, and the detailed description of the ‘colourful’ clothes and ‘beaded’ jewellery worn by the women, combine to produce an image of the Other both exotic and childlike. The reader is invited to share the experience and the anthropological gaze of the intrepid Western visitor, honoured and respected by these ‘natives’ who, we have been told earlier, are ‘considered an endangered Primitive Tribal Group and are recognised as "a people requiring particular protection"’⁴³. Thus while the article is framed as an appeal for support for the resistance of the Dongria Konds to the depredations of a British corporation, it does this in part by inter-textual reference to a whole canon of narratives of white European exploration, ‘discovery’, conquest and benevolent trusteeship of ‘primitive’ peoples.

Consistent with these earlier accounts, there is a preoccupation with racialised embodied difference: the clothing and ornaments of the ‘beautiful young girls’ are emphasized, but notably, it is in Jagger’s description of the Dongria Kond men that this is most evident. The references to the men’s ‘plain dhotis’, ‘long hair tied into a knot in the nape of their necks’ ‘axes on their shoulders and in their hands’ and (in an earlier passage) ‘hand-made drums’ conjure up the full panoply of associations with the ‘noble savage’ of colonial imagination and his racialised masculinity, and the desire which this evokes. Echoing the postdevelopmentalists, Jagger appears to mourn the baneful influence of ‘development’ – not in the destruction of rivers and mountains and livelihoods which the Dongria Konds have organized to resist, but in the affective loss of embodied authenticity which she experiences when she sees ‘some of the young men wearing shirts and T-shirts’.

But it is by combining discursive critique of texts like these with analysis of the material relations within which Action Aid (which organized Jagger's visit) and other development NGOs are positioned, and what this has meant for the struggle against Vedanta, that, I suggest, we can gain important insights into the implications of this incorporation of elements of postdevelopment discourse into NGO –led interventions.

The role of the NGO sector in neoliberal development models has been the subject of in-depth analysis and critique⁴⁴. The 1980s saw NGOs beginning to take over the role of service provision in the wake of the dismantling of existing forms of social protection by the state, and mobilizing people's – and particularly women's – unpaid labour to fill the gap. The period from the 1990s onwards, coinciding with the rise of the 'good governance' agenda, has seen them simultaneously play a much wider role as the chosen representatives of 'civil society' as conceptualized in dominant neoliberal approaches. In some contexts, this takes the form of actively mobilizing and expressing support for neoliberal economic policies or imperial intervention⁴⁵. But they have also, it has been argued, played a key role *within* broad movements of people's resistance to the depredations of global capital, a role which has centred around delinking this resistance from political ideology and coherent visions of social transformation. This depoliticisation operates both at the level of the way this resistance is represented by NGOs, who by virtue of the scale of their funding have considerable control over the production and circulation of information, and at the level of direct intervention into and attempts to control people's movements⁴⁶. These multiple roles, and the big international NGOs' central positioning within the architecture of development (which also incorporates the donor governments which fund them as well as transnational corporations and 'philanthrocapitalist' organizations like the Gates Foundation) makes their apparently contradictory actions easier to understand.

These contradictions have appeared to be particularly marked in the case of Action Aid. It has been publicly critical of neoliberal policies and publicises its involvement in campaigns like that of Niyamgiri. At the same time, activists have argued that particularly through its close links with (and funding from) the British government's international aid department DfID, it is implicated in facilitating corporate exploitation, with notable inconsistencies in its approach:

'Action Aid appeared to be campaigning vigorously against Vedanta only to apparently change course from time to time: on August 14th 2010, as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility project 'Partners in Change' it was part of a jury which awarded Vedanta the "Best Community Development" for its 'good work' around the Lanjigarh refinery at Niyamgiri hills, as advertised

proudly on Vedanta's website (accessed 25/7/11). Four days later Vedanta's Lanjigarh project was damned by the Indian government's Saxena Report for violations of tribal rights and illegal land grabbing'⁴⁷.

The ambiguous role of NGOs in the context of aluminium mining in Odisha have been examined in detail by Padel and Das⁴⁸. They point out that while Action Aid 'has been one of the most pro-active' in the campaign against Vedanta in Niyamgiri, it also receives funds from DfID, which has actively promoted the company. In 2000, as Whittel⁴⁹. notes, the government of Orissa (now Odisha) 'was guaranteed World Bank and DfID money to address its fiscal deficit, as long as it undertook "a program to reform the business and direction of government." ...In conjunction with a series of reforms commercialising the water and power sectors, the Industrial Policy Resolution and the Orissa Rehabilitation and Resttlement Policy, jointly written and funded by the DfID in 2001 and 2006 respectively, encouraged companies such as Vedanta, POSCO and Tata to come and mine the bauxite, coal and iron ore under the state's lands, paying rates of tax that do little to fill the state's already depleted coffers and displacing thousands of people'. Padel and Das trace the long-term relationship between Action Aid's Indian organisation and corporate capital which has developed in tandem with India's adoption of neoliberal economic policies since the early 1990s:

'as the New Economic Policy was coming into effect, Action Aid India formed a Corporate Partnership unit in 1993, which became "Partners in Change" in 1995, with funding from the Ford Foundation, DFID and Novib, laying the ground for MoUs with Sterlite (part of the Vedanta Group) ICICI (one of its major investor banks) and other corporate houses: business partnerships that raise questions about AAI's involvement in the movement to save Niyamgiri'⁵⁰

These apparent contradictions and other similar ones which followed seem be consistent with the understanding put forward by unfunded local campaigning organizations like the Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti that the interventions of international NGOs sought to manage and limit rather than support resistance to corporate capital. The sense that these NGOs were attempting to bypass existing peoples' organizations and 'handpick' individuals to represent the community in international campaigns, in order to depoliticize and diffuse them, further contributed to the anger towards NGOs expressed in incidents like the protest described at the beginning of this section.

NGOs and 'aliens' in the London anti-Vedanta protests

The role of NGOs in movements such as that around Niyamgiri also raises questions about practices of transnational solidarity, requiring further engagement with the ways in which processes of

racialisation are embedded within them. In this section I discuss aspects of the campaign in solidarity with the struggle in Niyamgiri in Britain in order to reflect on this further.

The protest which took place outside Vedanta plc's 2010 AGM near Westminster in Central London brought together a range of groups and individuals with diverse political approaches. As a participant in this protest (and similar ones in 2009 and in following years) I was struck by several aspects of it, which I explain below.

This protest and others like it can be understood as examples of the way power operates spatially on a micro-level. Firstly and more obviously this takes place through the reproduction of the boundary between the shareholders meeting where decisions are taken inside a building guarded by the police (and which was on this occasion infiltrated by a number of activists who had bought shares in order to raise questions inside the meeting), and the street outside where protestors raised the demands of the people whose lives were most directly affected by the decisions. But it is also interesting to consider the unacknowledged and racialised boundaries within the space of the protest itself, and its reproduction of the wider positioning of NGOs in relation to people's movements.

In many ways the protest felt like a space within which two very different types of political action, each with its own political imaginaries, and material and discursive practices, overlapped, without quite touching⁵¹. The non-NGO protestors, mainly members of non-funded campaigning organizations and individuals, and many of South Asian origin, held huge hand painted placards with photographs of Anil Agarwal, under the slogan 'Wanted – for Vedanta's Murders and Environmental Crimes'; they angrily yelled slogans like 'Anil Agarwal – blood on your hands' and 'Who Killed Arsi Majhi? (one of the leaders of the movement in Niyamgiri) Vedanta did!' Other placards targeted the then British Prime Minister David Cameron for his collusion with Vedanta's crimes. On either side of this group of protestors stood two smaller groups, whose manner was quite different. On one side, members of Survival International stood quietly and slightly apart all wearing yellow T-shirts printed with the Survival logo and holding matching printed placards with the slogan 'Vedanta's Profits – Dongria's Destruction' and the name of the organisation prominently displayed⁵² On the other side, again slightly apart stood another group of about half a dozen protestors, all in red t-shirts printed with the Action Aid logo. From time to time, this group launched into a group chant of their own which ran: one: we are the people, two: a little bit louder, three: we've got to get Vedanta out of here..!'

However, a great deal of the publicity generated by the protests focused on the presence of two actors, who had been hired by Survival International to attend the protest in blue body paint to represent members of the Na'vi tribe – the inhabitants of the planet Pandora from the recently released science

fiction film 'Avatar'(2009). The two actors were photographed holding placards reading 'Save the Real Avatar Tribe'. This parallel had first been drawn by Survival International in February of that year, when they placed an advertisement in entertainment magazine 'Variety' invoking the idea that 'Avatar is fantasy...and real' and appealing to James Cameron, Avatar's director, to 'please help the Dongria'⁵³. This notion of the 'real Avatar tribe' was taken up extensively in the media (including in India newspapers) and became a very popular theme of campaigning around Niyamgiri.

Campaigners on Niyamgiri were not the only ones to make use of the Avatar theme. As Deuze explains, in Bil'in, a Palestinian village located in the central West Bank, where weekly protests have been taking place against the Israeli state's construction of a wall around its territory, five protestors wore Na'vi costumes in February 2010⁵⁴. A statement on Bil'in's website explained "[I]like Palestinians, the Avatars fight imperialism, although the colonizers have different origins. The Avatars' presence in Bil'in today symbolizes the united resistance to imperialism of all kinds"⁵⁵. But these two contexts in which the Avatar parallel was invoked have very different implications for questions of agency and representation. Significantly, in contrast to the Palestinian case, members of the Dongria Kond community have never dressed up as Na'vi themselves: whereas, as their statement clearly explains, the Palestinian protestors mobilized 'Avatar' as a political metaphor, the Dongria Konds are represented by others as literally resembling the Na'vi.

We must ask then how people in India who are organizing to resist the plunder of their environment by corporate capital come to be represented in this way by their supporters in Britain and elsewhere? What does this imply for notions of solidarity? What are the particular discursive and material relationships which make this kind of representation possible, and which in turn are reproduced by its circulation?

Part of the effectiveness of the comparison with the film clearly stems from the parallels between the situation in Niyamgiri and the plot of Avatar, which revolves around a corporate/military mission from Earth to drive the 'native humanoid' Na'vi from their homes in order to mine for the valuable 'unobtainium ore'. But the parallel is taken much further: the focus in this campaign is not actually on the aggressors but on the irreducible 'otherness' of the Dongria Konds themselves – who have been represented as the embodiment of the 'real-life' Na'vi to the extent where several online photographic images used in campaigning fused the face of a young Dongria Kond girl with that of one of the blue-skinned Na'vi characters in a 'mirror' image. Further, the Avatar campaigning strategy 'worked', I would argue, precisely because the portrayal of the Na'vi in Avatar (unlike other science fiction portrayals of 'aliens', sympathetic or otherwise) is clearly based on markers more often associated

with racialised groups. The Na'vi have exaggerated but evidently human features - large, widely spaced eyes, flat noses and high cheekbones - and wear their hair in braids and beads. Their blue skin evokes the body painting practiced by certain indigenous groups in the global South, while their lifestyle 'in harmony' with nature is also clearly intended to indicate their equivalence to these groups. Significantly, notwithstanding the use of makeup and CGI in creating the Na'vi on screen, none of the actors selected to play the main Na'vi characters are white. I would argue that the emphasis on racialised 'otherness' in the mobilization of the 'Avatar' parallel foregrounds a colonial ethos of morality, where people in the 'developed world' are made aware of an obligation to act to protect both the environment and those whose lives are lived in harmony with it and are apparently as yet untouched by 'development' – people who are assumed to live (like the Na'vi literally do) 'on another planet' from those campaigning on their behalf, a world beyond the political. Even more significantly, it forecloses certain kinds of political approaches – those which recognize the collective political resistance organized by the people affected and take this as the starting point for actions based on an ethos of solidarity, linking it with struggles taking place in the global North.

While the Dongria Konds are recognized to be overwhelmingly opposed to Vedanta's plans in NGO-produced materials, there is little acknowledgement of the existence of organizations among them or their initiation of and sustained participation in political action and advocacy. Whereas some observers characterise such tendencies as 'oversimplification', a side-effect resulting from international NGOs' compulsion to attract public support in their home countries and compete with each other to raise funds, I would suggest we need to look at them more carefully.

The construction of the members of the Dongria Kond community within NGO discourses as pre-modern, innocent and uncorrupted 'noble savages' appears to preclude consideration of their engagement in sustained political organizing which has made possible the series of protests, marches and blockades which prevented mining from 2002 onwards; their historic and present relation to political structures such as the various levels and arms of the Indian state and its colonial predecessor, or their articulation of any visions of the future which depart from a narrative of restoration of 'traditional' lifestyles and livelihoods. By contrast, the possibility of collective action to bring about change by an undifferentiated British public, is emphasised and valorized by the major NGOs involved in the Vedanta campaign. This public is expected to act on behalf of, rather than alongside, poor people in the global South⁵⁶, a transposition of agency epitomized by the British Action Aid volunteers' adoption of the 'we are the people' chant which originated in South Africa. The

celebration of popular agency which the chant articulates here comes to be framed in terms of moral obligation towards ‘other’ worlds rather than a political project of transformation of one’s own, as Survival International’s slogan ‘Their Future is in Your Hands’ implies. Mutual solidarity, alliances between different but related struggles, or even the process of identifying shared interests in change - all of which require a much more extensive and committed engagement with actually existing struggles in the South, representing what for Spivak is ‘not just a problem of knowledge but a call to a relationship’⁵⁷ - are precluded in this framework in which the British public is called upon to prevent the primordial desecration of the ‘unspoiled’.

Increasingly while development discourses bestow ‘agency’ upon people – and specifically women - in the global South in the form of individual entrepreneurialism and the moral imperative to help oneself⁵⁸, collective agency is located in and largely restricted to undifferentiated publics/civil society in the global north, and here the imperative is again a moral one, to help – or rescue - less fortunate others. In this model, connections between campaigners in the North and those for whom they advocate can only be configured along two axes: that of the ‘heroic rescue narrative’⁵⁹, and that of obligation based on the benefits to the global North of unequal trade, resource extraction and environmental destruction in the South. The possibility of complicating and blurring this North/South dichotomy by acknowledging that the ‘public’ in the global North is itself structured by a highly unequal distribution of these benefits along lines of class, race and gender in particular, and that there may be struggles taking place there which are confronting the same forces which are ravaging the global South, is ruled out in this model. This is particularly dangerous since it not only limits the scope and effectiveness of campaigning, but with its reiteration of immutable difference, it actively reinforces the currently dominant ‘development/security’ model of relations between people in the global North and South in which people in (or entering from) the South are identified primarily as a racialised threat to those in the North, which can only be contained through neoliberal forms of development. While campaigning INGOS articulate this differently, they arguably mobilize the same logic, which also contributes to the exclusive re-imagining of the ‘British public’ as a homogenous entity with shared national interests, in a manoeuvre characteristic of imperialism⁶⁰.

As portrayed in British-based NGO-led campaigns then, the struggle over Niyamgiri appears to epitomize the binary opposition which characterizes conservative post-development theorising – with Vedanta as the harbinger of development on the one hand and the Dongria Kond community representing tradition, simplicity and harmony with the natural world on the other. This narrative is

repeated in a range of NGO-produced material on Niyamgiri online and in print and broadcast media⁶¹.

However, there are also other representations which have emerged from the people's struggle in Niyamgiri and the surrounding area, which suggest that what people in Niyamgiri are actually saying is considerably more complex and does not fit neatly into these categories. In the following section I consider one of these, the film *Wira Pdika* (2005)⁶²

‘We want permanent development’: Counter-narratives from Niyamgiri

Independently produced and directed by Amarendra Das and Samarendra Das and released in 2005, *Wira Pdika*'s title is in the Kui language spoken by the Konds. In Oriya, the film is called *Matir Poko, Company Loko*. Both translate as ‘Earthworm, Company Man’, the film's English title.

In this film, which does not contain any narration or voiceovers, people from the Dongria Kond and Majhi Kond communities across a wider region which includes Niyamgiri speak about their lives and their struggles against ‘the company’. As the film shows, a series of aluminium companies have been attempting to mine bauxite in the region since the early 1990s, and faced sustained resistance from the people living there. It should be clear that this discussion of *Wira Pdika* does not seek to present some representations as ‘more authentic’ than others in the sense we have already referred to. The film does not make claims to present an ‘unbiased’ view of events; on the contrary it is an example of politically committed filmmaking seeking to produce work which can be widely used as a tool in the struggle. Rather, I seek in this section to demonstrate the existence of ideas and perspectives which have been silenced in mainstream representations that incorporate elements of post-development thinking, and to provoke reflection on how this silencing relates to particular political projects and structures of power.

The film conveys a number of ideas which counter the dominant NGO narrative in relation to the region. The Kond people's opposition to corporate mining has been sustained and organized and is informed by a history of struggles going back to the colonial period, with long and often bitter experience of interactions with politicians of major parties, the state in the form of the District and Block administrations and the police, and NGOs. For example, Kond activist Bhagaban Majhi, a spokesperson of the movement against mining in the area describes the prelude to the launch of the movement against corporate projects to mine bauxite in the area 13 years earlier⁶³:

‘Anantaram Majhi, the Congress Party MLA, came to our meetings, he spoke against the company...he said he will help us if we vote for him. We elected him but nothing changed, He didn’t speak for us but took the company’s side. That is how the movement started’ (*Wira Pdika*)

As this suggests, while marginalized and excluded on multiple levels, the Konds are in fact not isolated from the outside world as Survival’s notion of a ‘remote tribe’ implies, but have been compelled to negotiate relations with other groups and with the state over several centuries. They are incorporated into the lowest levels of a social formation structured by caste and class. The people interviewed in *Wira Pdika* convey this powerfully in the frequent references to the discrimination and contemptuous attitudes towards *adivasis* which they face, and the way these attitudes are used to suppress dissent.

‘We, the people of 12-13 villages wrote an application to the district administration saying ‘we are not going to give up our water and forests, we won’t part with our Niyamgiri. Then (they said) –“Who has written this? A pig or a goat? Does he have a name or an address?”...’ (Daisingh Majhi, Niyamgiri Surakshya Samiti, [Save Niyamgiri Campaign] Belamba, in *Wira Pdika*)

‘They ridicule us and say “what are the Konds up to? What do they know?”’ (Bhima Majhi, Niyamgiri Surakshya Samiti, Turiguda, in *Wira Pdika*)

In addition, while people express a sense of the sacredness of Niyamgiri, this is articulated in combination with an emphasis on their material dependence on the mountain, and also with an analysis of the possible ecological impacts of its destruction, in the context of already precarious livelihoods. In the same interview cited above, Bhima Majhi explains, ‘We are resisting for our motherland, for our mountain. The summer is very hot already. It will get hotter if (Vedanta) Sterlite comes. You won’t get rain then. The summer is so hard for us already, so we want them to stop. So we oppose Sterlite, we oppose the government’ (*Wira Pdika*)

Similarly, local activist Bhagaban Majhi explains that ‘we are tribal cultivators (*chasi adivasi*)...earthworms (*matir poku*)we want permanent development (*sthahi unnati*). Provide us with irrigation for our land. Give us hospitals and medicines, give us schools and teachers. Give us our land and forests. We don’t need the company. Get rid of the company. We have been saying this for 13 years but the government is not listening’ (*Wira Pdika*).

Further, as this makes clear, the Konds’ struggle against Vedanta is not primarily conceived as a struggle against development and in favour of maintaining the status quo, or what Rahnema and

Bawtree call ‘noble forms of poverty’⁶⁴. In fact the notion of ‘development (*unnati*, which can also be translated as ‘progress’) is one which they frequently mobilized to make concrete demands for change: for education, healthcare, irrigation: resources which the state has consistently failed to provide to their communities. The discourse which pervades *Wira Pdika* then, is one in which people make claims not against development, but about the kinds of development which they do and do not want. In this context, the post-development influenced approach deployed by NGOs which constructs contact with the outside world as polluting the purity of the Konds’ lifestyle acts to silence these demands and construct them as inauthentic and illegitimate⁶⁵. As Eriksson Baaz writes, ‘the problem of the post-development approach...is not only located in the risk of relegating questions of poverty and economic inequality to the margins by an infatuated interest in the authentic and the unspoiled. It is also about the ways in which demands for economic development and equality are delegitimized’⁶⁶

Lastly, many of the people interviewed in the film make it clear that they conceptualise the activities of companies like Vedanta as representing not development, but plunder. The opposition to ‘the company’ is articulated over and over again in terms of resisting the expropriation and seizure of resources – water, land, forests, and mountains, destruction and environmental degradation.

While as we have suggested, it has been neglected in post-development thinking, for those resisting ‘the company’ in Odisha, the distinction between a developmental state and one which merely exists to facilitate ‘accumulation by dispossession’ is extremely significant. As Bhagaban Majhi explains:

‘Where will the people go once the construction is over? Is this development? You say you are here for development – how many high schools, colleges, engineering colleges, health centres will you set up? When we ask these questions, they stay silent..... Destroying age-old resources is not development.....Over the 23 years (which the bauxite will last) the government will get Rs 12-13 billion – but the company will grab Rs 2880 billion in 23 years. They will build red mud tanks and ash ponds – they will pollute our environment and export our resources abroad. How does our government benefit, the public benefit? Whereas the company benefits so much. He had no answer’ (*Wira Pdika*).

But fighting on this difficult terrain in which the notion of ‘development’ itself becomes a site of contestation also requires an awareness of how the people’s demands for ‘stable’(sthai) development – for education, healthcare, irrigation and other forms of state provision too can be appropriated and manipulated. In *Wira Pdika* we hear how the companies used the familiar practices of Indian state developmentalism, with its preoccupation with enumeration and classification inherited from the colonial state, in order to gather information for its own purposes: ‘Earlier when company people

came, they would disguise themselves as veterinary doctors. They would get the information they required from us on the pretext of doing surveys about our cattle, sheep and chickens. They also came to us as auxiliary nurses and midwives (ANM) to ask about statistics of village population....how many women, how many children...After many such surveys, we became suspicious and would not let them carry out further surveys' (Bhagaban Majhi, in *Wira Pdika*). After this strategy failed, the mining corporates set up their own NGOs, forming an organisation called Utkal Rural Development Society (URDS)⁶⁷. 'They started free health check-up camps, free seed donation camps, free adult education... We saw they ...were really company people. They aimed to win people's confidence and to divide people. So we protested against this organisation. Then they brought in Business Partners for Development..we also opposed them. After this there was repression, jail, false cases, police beating up protesters....' (Bhagaban Majhi, in *Wira Pdika*).

Conclusion

This article has identified three main elements associated with a section of post-development thinking which are visible in the discourse and material practices of international NGOs engaged in transnational campaigns against mining in Niyamgiri. Firstly, through both campaigning discourses (such as those in Bianca Jagger's article discussed above) and practices (such as the use of the Avatar parallel) they reproduce racialised representations of the 'noble savage' in need of protection in order that they may remain isolated from and untainted by modernity. Secondly, and following on from this, they do not acknowledge the history and present of sustained political organising and resistance among the *adivasi* people of the region, and the specific demands for change which emerge from this. Thirdly, they reproduce a narrative based on binary oppositions which, by constructing development as a pernicious and homogenous metanarrative, obscures changes in the dominant model of development which have facilitated the current unrestrained exploitation and appropriation of the region's resources by footloose transnational capital.

The experiences and analyses articulated by local activists in the film *Wira Pdika*, I suggest, provide a counter-narrative which directly challenges these understandings and elisions. We also need to consider the work which these understandings, selectively appropriated from post-development, do in paradoxically displacing and marginalizing local activists and silencing their complex engagements with ideas of development, potentially diffusing and depoliticising resistance to neoliberal forms of development, while transposing collective agency onto undifferentiated publics in the global North. As I have suggested, this requires an engagement not only with the discourses produced by international NGOs, but also a recognition of how they are materially embedded within the contemporary architecture of neoliberal development, illustrated for example, in the case of

Niyamgiri, by the complex interrelationship between Action Aid, DfID and Vedanta. It is this recognition which has led, as we have noted, to a direct rejection of NGO intervention by local activists in Niyamgiri.

In the mid-1990s, post-development thinkers drew inspiration from a wave of ‘New Social Movements’ which they saw as autonomous, polyvalent, and unlike those which had preceded them, not geared towards systematic structural transformations. Two decades on, movements against neoliberal global capital have not only multiplied and intensified, but their articulation of collective visions of transformation, albeit often multiple ones, has become impossible to ignore. The practice of transnational political solidarity with these movements, I would suggest, requires a sustained engagement with these visions, and a decisive break with the colonial discursive and material relations which continue to structure NGO campaigning.

NOTES

¹ Escobar, ‘Beyond the Search’

² Ibid., 11

³ See for example Esteva and Prakash, Grassroots Post-Modernism’

⁴ Escobar, 2012

⁵ Baaz, *The Paternalism of Partnership*; Wilson, *Race, Racism and Development*

⁶ Andreasson, this volume, Baaz, *The Paternalism of Partnership*

⁷ Wilson, *Race, Racism and Development*

⁸ Escobar, *Encountering Development*

⁹ Ibid., 170.

¹⁰ Ziai, ‘The Ambivalence of post-development’ ; ‘Post-Development’

¹¹ Ziai, ‘Post-Development’, 837

¹² Ibid, 837

¹³ Rahnema and Bawtree, *The Post-Development Reader*, x.

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- ¹⁴ Baaz, *The Paternalism of Partnership*:160, italics in original
- ¹⁵ Bhabha, 'The Other Question'
- ¹⁶
- ¹⁷ Hall, 'The Spectacle of the "Other"'
- ¹⁸ Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks*
- ¹⁹ Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*
- ²⁰ Das, *The Republic of Bihar*, 69; Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*.
- ²¹ Das, *The Republic of Bihar*, 60.
- ²² Hunter, *A Statistical Account*
- ²³ Escobar, 'Beyond the Search'
- ²⁴ Ziai, 'Post-Development'
- ²⁵ Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other*, 88; see also Chow, *Writing Diaspora*
- ²⁶ Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*
- ²⁷ See for example Juluri, 'Hinduism and its Culture Wars', Shah, 'Against Caste in British Law'
- ²⁸ Escobar. 'Encountering Development' 22-24.
- ²⁹ Baaz, *The Paternalism of Partnership*; Kapoor, (this volume); Andreasson (this volume)
- ³⁰ White, 'The Gender Lens', 56.
- ³¹ Harvey, 'The New Imperialism'
- ³² See Wilson, 'Towards a Radical Re-appropriation' for a discussion of this in the context of gender, development and neo-liberal feminism
- ³³ Ahmad 'The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality'; Cooper 'Modernizing Bureaucrats', cited in Ziai 'Post-Development'
- ³⁴ Duffield, 'Getting Savages to Fight Barbarians', 152
- ³⁵ Wilson, 'Re-centring Race in Development'
- ³⁶ Hall, 'Gramsci's Relevance', 24
- ³⁷ Foil Vedanta, <http://www.foilvedanta.org/about/>
- ³⁸ Tripathi, 'Activists Object to Home Ministry'

³⁹ Foil Vedanta ‘Niyamgiri decries state human rights abuses’

<http://www.foilvedanta.org/news/niyamgiri-decries-state-human-rights-abuses-and-rejects-ngos/>

⁴⁰ The latter notably includes Foil Vedanta, which has been opposing Vedanta’s activities in India, Zambia, South Africa and elsewhere

⁴¹ See for example web pages such as that of Survival International on Niyamgiri

<http://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/dongria>;

⁴² Jagger, ‘The Battle for Niyamgiri’

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See for example Manji and O’Coill ‘The Missionary Position’; Hearn ‘African NGOs’ Choudry and Kapoor,(eds.) *NGOization*; Wallace, ‘NGO Dilemmas’

⁴⁵ Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy*; Chandler, *From Kosovo to Kabul and Beyond*

⁴⁶ In the case of Niyamgiri, it was these attempts to intervene in and redirect the movement which led to the protests against NGOs reported in 2016

⁴⁷ South Asia Solidarity Group, ‘Strange Bedfellows’

⁴⁸ Padel and Das *Out of this Earth*

⁴⁹ Whittel, *Dodgy Development*

⁵⁰ Padel and Das, *Out of this Earth*, 254

⁵¹ For a discussion of a spatial approach to protest, see Kaika and Karaliotas’ ‘The spatialization of democratic politics’ in which the authors discuss the co-existence of two distinct political imaginaries in the ‘Indignants’ protests in Athens’ Syntagma Square

⁵² This is not intended to reproduce ideas about authentic or inauthentic protestors (or placards!)

⁵³ Cameron did not respond to Survival’s appeal. He did go to the Amazon rainforest with another group, US-based Amazon Watch, to meet the Kayapo people threatened by a dam planned by the Brazilian government.

⁵⁴ Deuze, ‘Survival of the Mediated’

⁵⁵ Bil’in Popular Committee, 2010, cited in Deuze ‘Survival of the Mediated’, 6

⁵⁶ In making this distinction between speaking ‘on behalf of’ and ‘alongside’ one can draw on Spivak’s concept of ‘responsibility’ which ‘signifies not only the act of response which completes the transaction of speaker and listener, but also the ethical stance of making discursive room for the Other to exist’ (Landry and Maclean, *The Spivak Reader*).

⁵⁷ Landry and MacLean, *The Spivak Reader*

⁵⁸ Wilson 'Towards a Radical Re-appropriation'

⁵⁹ see for example Nash, 'Global Citizenship as Show Business', on the Make Poverty History campaign

⁶⁰ This is accompanied by the exclusion from 'Britishness' of those who are constructed as not sharing these 'national' interests.

⁶¹ For example, in Survival's online film 'Mine: Story of a Sacred Mountain' (narrated in the hushed tones usually reserved for wildlife films by the quintessentially upper-class-English voice of actress Joanna Lumley), the emphasis is on the isolated existence of the 'remote tribe' and the idyllic environment in which they had been living until the advent of the mining company.

⁶² Dir. Amarendra Das and Samarendra Das, 2005, India.

⁶³ The first of these was Utkal Alumina International Ltd. (UAIL) which sought to mine bauxite deposits covering 10 or more square kilometers on top of the mountain Bapla Mali. UAIL was formed by Indal and Tata in a joint venture with Norway's Norsk Hydro (Padel and Das, *Out of this Earth*, 109).

⁶⁴ Rahnema and Bawtree, x

⁶⁵ Similar processes can be observed in a variety of contexts: for example, McNeish's discussion of indigenous protests in Bolivia against the Morales government's road building project in the TIPNIS region highlights that 'In contrast to the information provided by supporting environmental organizations and analysts, the indigenous leaders stated that their protest was not intended to indefinitely stop all development projects in their territory, but rather to oppose the irresponsible building of a highway that, given its routing, would clearly not benefit local communities in the TIPNIS Johnny, an Osomomo leader who had taken part in the protest, reported to Al Jazeera that "if they build it correctly, so that it skirts the reserve, a road could be a good thing. For example, we have very few health supplies and doctors here and it could help keep our children healthy"' (McNeish, 'Extraction, Protest and Indigeneity', 228-229)

⁶⁶ Baaz, 'The Paternalism of Partnership', 163.

⁶⁷ The URDS was set up by Utkal Alumina International Limited. According to Padel and Das, the World Bank 'listed it as a model project in its Business Partners for Development scheme (BPD) a worldwide scheme promoting "tri-sectoral partnerships" between government, companies and civil society. The UK was the only government that became officially involved, through...Dfid' (Padel and Das, 'Out of this Earth', 115).

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